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IN SEARCH OF PERICLES - BEYOND THE GOLDEN AGE OF DETERRENCE

by

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for

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In Search of Pericles - Beyond the Golden Age of Deterrence

Clausewitz once said that, "Nothing is more important in life than finding the right standpoint for seeing and judging events." In the days of Greece and Rome, this is the service that Pericles provided Athens in guiding its strategic thinking to defend it from the warrior-state Sparta, it is what Clausewitz did in recognizing the implications of Napoleonic warfare to the 18th century world order, it is what Bernard Brodie did in the 20th century when he "saw and judged" the meaning of "atomic weapons" and finally, it is what George Kennan did when he gave us the "strategy of containment" for the Cold War.

In the aftermath of sweeping changes in Eastern Europe, and an unresolved crisis in the Middle East, we find ourselves confronted by a similar task of "seeing and judging" the events that have not only transformed the strategic landscape, but also clouded our path into this new and unfamiliar terrain. In a larger sense, finding our way through this national security strategy terrain is an exercise in managing the apparently contradictory forces of continuity and change. What should be preserved? What should be eliminated? When? How? and Where? I submit that many of the answers lie in our own history and experience, in the rich flow of ideas developed by our statesmen and theorists and in our judgement of the world we inhabit. From this should emerge the basic national security strategy map for finding our way through the badlands that may lie ahead. Unfortunately, a quick review of 20th century history, especially the Cold War era, shows a disregard for history in various Presidential administrations precisely when it came to national security strategy. As Tocqueville observed,

"Democratic nations care but little for what has been, but they are haunted by visions of what will be; in this discretion their unbounded imagination grows and dilates beyond all measure . . ."

From an analytic standpoint, the fundamental ideas that seem to emerge from our history are ideas about national purpose, values, power and how we "see and judge" the world that we must live in.

NATIONAL PURPOSE

The fundamental purpose of the United States from which our broad interests and objectives have evolved are clearly laid out in the Preamble to the Constitution, ". . .to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the General Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity." From this and the Bill of Rights come our basic interests in physical security, economic well-being and deep belief in the worth of each individual (our basic values).

These are broad, fundamental interests upon which our goals and objectives as a country should stand. Though seemingly mundane, there is great power in this. These words tell us who we are. They provide us as a nation among nations, a set of concrete, internal moral coordinates by which we can navigate, keep our balance and maintain our strategic direction when confronted by crisis. They could have saved us from the identity crisis that we seemed to experience when we embarked upon the Vietnam ordeal. They could have saved us from supporting unsavory dictators, if we had remembered them and asked ourselves several common-sense questions. In the bi-polar world from which we have come, the Truman administration and NSC-68 did not forget this Constitutional basis for our interests, objectives and national strategy. Though modified, the national strategy that emerged was containment. It laid out three objectives that were to be ". . . equally valid and necessary in both peace and war." These were:

- 1) to be strong economically and militarily;
- 2) to lead in building a successfully functioning political and economic system abroad as well as at home; and
- 3) to foster a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system.

Furthermore, the successful attainment of this final objective would represent ". . . a triumph for the ideas of freedom and democracy" and ". . . must be an immediate objective of US policy." Although it laid out the ends of our policy, it did not address the means, save to say that ". . . a free society is limited in its choice of means to achieve its ends."

This approach to constructing national security strategy is instructive. It flowed from the Constitution, it set objectives and recognized the nature of the bi-polar world that existed then. The problem with the national security strategy that emerged, a strategy of containment, was not its global sense of direction, but its execution through misinterpretation and misapplication in successive administrations of the Cold War era. As Bernard Brodie observed,

"The perennial problem for the leaders of a superpower like the United States is to determine the outer boundaries of what is truly vital . . ."

POWER

If a clear-eyed conception of our purpose as a Nation provides the intellectual capital, the logic and the superintending guidance that shapes our national security strategies, then an understanding of the nature of power is essential.

Power, as President Teddy Roosevelt saw it, was ". . . the present element in the conduct of world affairs" and so it remains

today. As Roosevelt understood it, "It is impossible to treat our foreign policy (and thus our national security strategy) save as conditioned upon the attitude we are willing to take toward our army and especially our navy . . . it is contemptible, for a nation, as for an individual to . . . proclaim purposes, or to take positions which are ridiculous if unsupported by potential force, and then to refuse to provide this force." Roosevelt was talking not so much the direct use of force, but that we need forces in-being.

He recognized also, as did Mahan, that we are a maritime power and that maritime strength will always be a pivotal element in whatever national security strategy we construct. President Teddy Roosevelt was one of the first American Presidents to project American power abroad, if only symbolically, when he sent the fleet around the world. In more recent times, the same immutable fact of our geographic position require any power projection strategy to be primarily a logistics strategy. This is something that we have had to relearn in the current Middle East crisis.

Although discussions of the waining efficacy of military force seem to be in vogue, I submit that military force will play an increasing role in the decades ahead. Witness the events in the Middle East, where the non-military instruments of diplomatic and economic statecraft become meaningless without the leverage and forum created by the physical presence of armed forces. Power, in Rooseveltian terms, is the element in which this crisis will be decided. Whether the economic sanctions work or military force is used, it was credible armed force that created the conditions for success. As George Kennan observed,

"You have no idea how much it contributes to the general politeness and pleasantness of diplomacy when you have a little quiet armed force in the background."

Whether it is Teddy Roosevelt's "Big Stick" or George Kennan's "quiet armed force in the background", strong forces in-being are indispensable. Roosevelt and Kennan recognized it in their time, and it will be especially true in the days ahead.

*For Us
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Although Kennan may seem to be in agreement with this idea, his ideas and understanding of power and its uses are much more sublime and useful to us. The intellectual father of "containment", Kennan "saw and judged" the element of power differently. The very fact that power was the medium in which nations conducted their affairs, demanded great skill and clear strategic thinking on the part of national leadership. The strategy of containment that he created was nothing less than the brilliant 20th century formulation of Sun Tzu's ancient axiom, "The acme of skill is to subdue the enemy without fighting."

Kennan's idea of containment required not just the use of

In attempting to advance the idea of the League of Nations as a means to pursue peace and democratic principles he gave us an idea that we use today. The idea of the United Nations is important. Today in the Middle East, the forum provided by the U.N. as a mechanism by which to build consensus, to form coalitions and to mobilize the efforts of the world's nations against the threat posed by Saddam Hussein has been indispensable.

Our ability to handle this world crisis is due in large measure to the forum offered by the U.N. In an increasingly multipolar world, where our relative power is no longer dominant, the quality of our leadership becomes even more important. Our national security strategy should reflect an understanding of world power politics and the fact that America is founded upon a distinct body of ethical principles. It should also reflect the absolute necessity for world class leadership. No amount of strategic brilliance captured in a well constructed national security strategy could offset gross miscalculations by incompetent or average leadership.

In judging the international context, I submit that the real-politik developed by Nixon-Kissinger is instructive. As Terry Deibel describes it in his book, Presidents, Public Opinion and Power:

"Here was an intelligent, conceptual yet pragmatic policy that avoided simplistic or ideologically slanted formulations, that began with realistic background assumptions about the world and how it worked, that held a clear-eyed assessment of national interests and resources available to support it. . ."

This element of reality and clear-eyed assessment should be a dominant feature of our national security strategy. We should see the world as it is. This does not mean of course that we should embrace Macchiavellian principles of guile and deception either in the formulation or execution of national security strategy.

If we could combine a Wilsonian view of the world with a Nixon-Kissinger real political approach to national security strategy formulation, we would, to paraphrase Sun Tzu, "know the enemy, know ourself, and the know the international context."

CONCLUSION

In trying to "see and judge" what ideas developed in our twentieth century past might prove useful in constructing national security strategy, I found successive presidential administrations that seemed to forget the experience of their predecessors. We seemed to have a facility for forgetting history, especially our own. In contrast, our Founding Fathers viewed history as

especially relevant. A good example can be found in Alexander Hamilton's Federalist Paper No. 6 which gives us a timeless, strategic assessment:

"To look for a continuation of harmony between a number of independent unconnected sovereignties in the same neighborhood, would be to disregard the uniform course of human events, and to set at defiance the accumulated experience of the ages."

It is this sense of history, "this experience of the ages," that we need to incorporate in our strategic thinking. Did George Kennan in his twentieth century formulation of "containment" give us the philosophical basis for a national security strategy in the 90's "to subdue the enemy without fighting"?

As Pericles guided the strategic thinking of Athens against Sparta, Kennan provided the "intellectual capital" that we have consumed in our strategic thinking throughout the Cold War era. What kind of strategic thinking will emerge to guide us as we enter the post-Cold War period? Where is the Pericles beyond our golden age of deterrence?